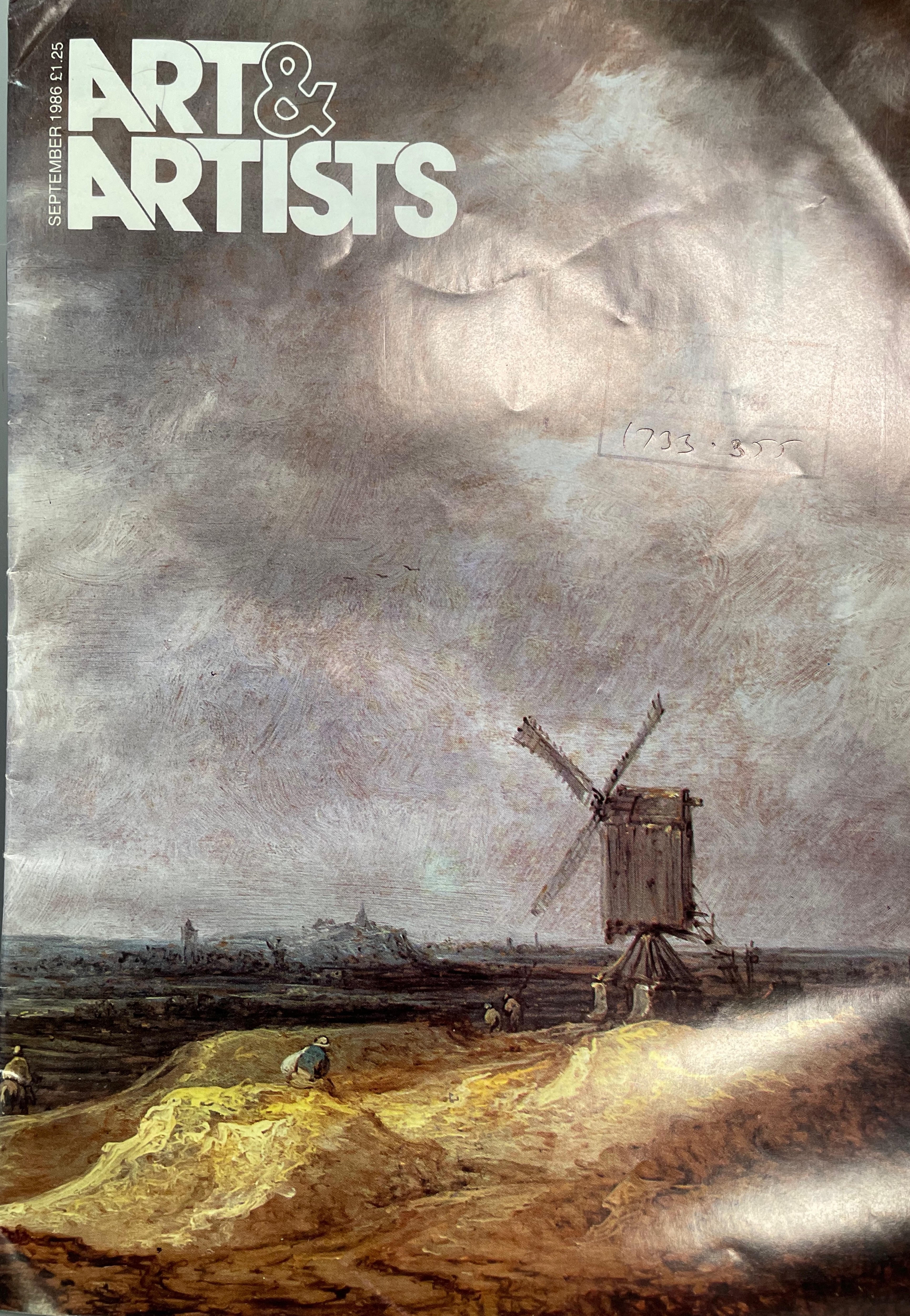


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# ART & ARTISTS



Front cover: Detail from *A Windmill by a River* by Jan van Goyen from the National Gallery exhibition on Dutch Landscape reviewed in this issue.

# ART & ARTISTS

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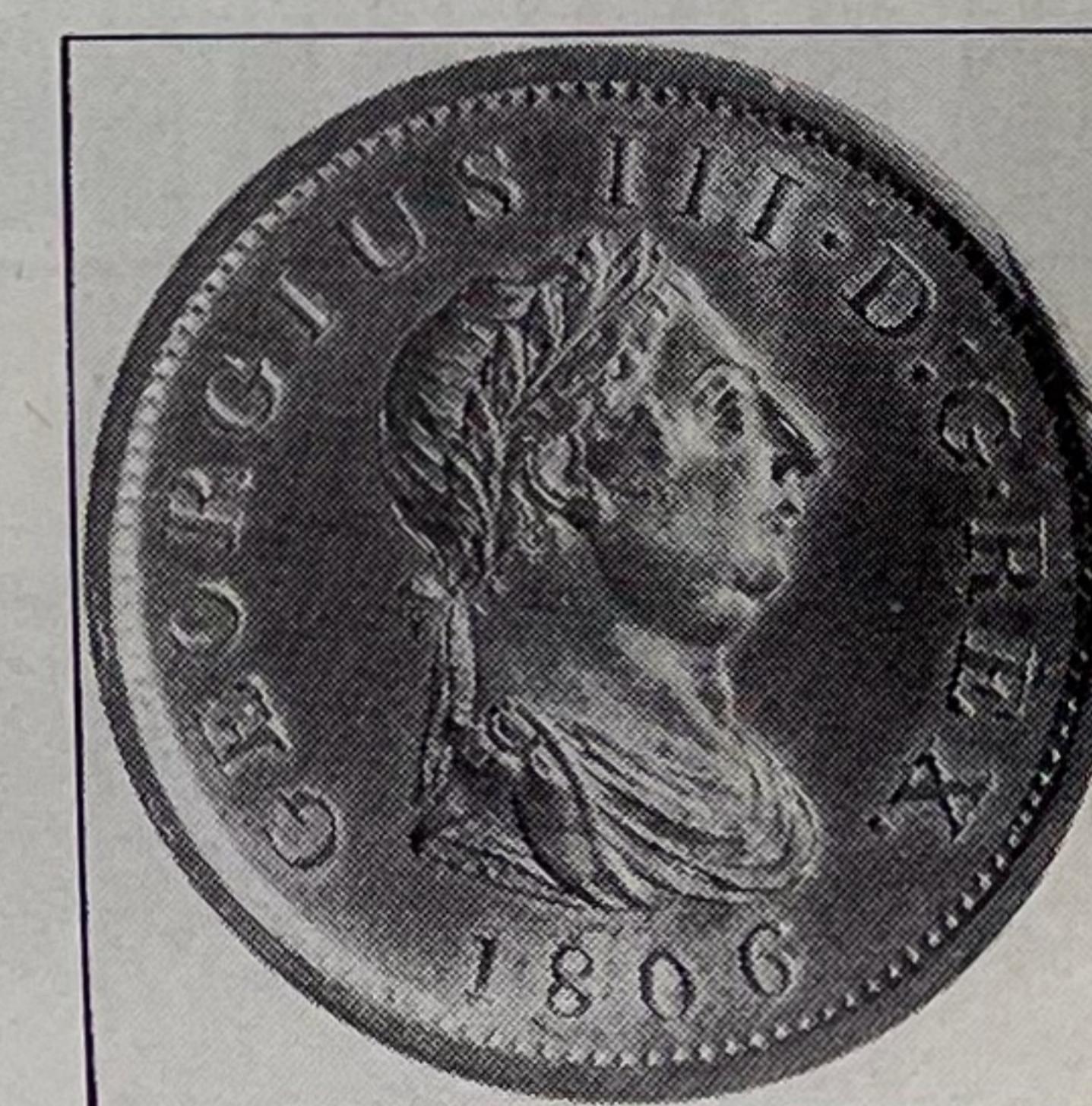
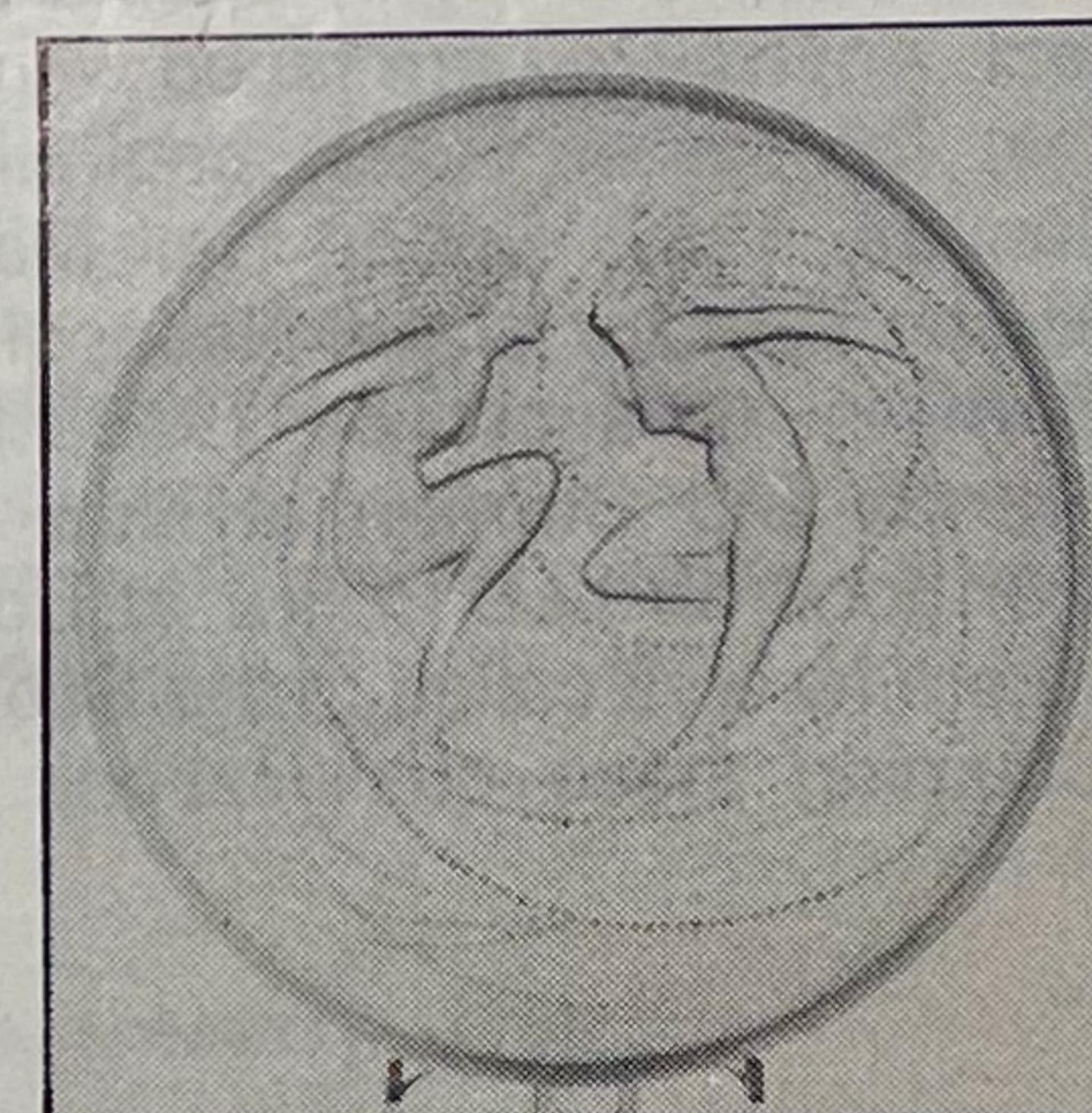
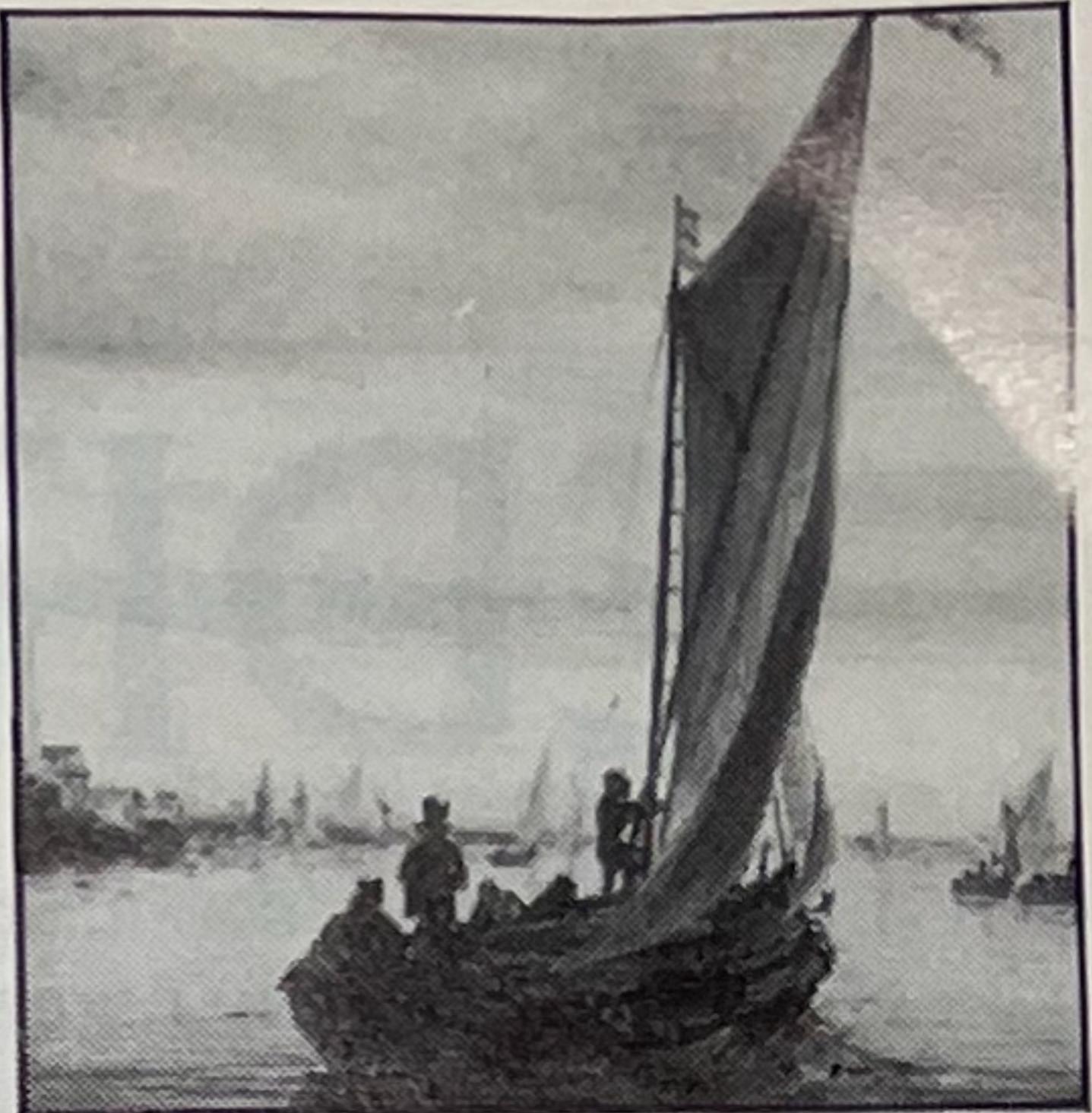
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Articles on the New English Art Club, Milner Gray, seven Hungarian Artists, Maria Simonds-Gooding, Paper Art, plus book and exhibition reviews and a comprehensive guide to what's on in London and the Regions for the month ahead.

# Selling the Arts and Crafts in Oxford

JOAN CROSSLEY-HOLLAND remembers eighteen years of endeavour at the Oxford Gallery

THE second day of July. A brilliant promise in this early morning light. I have just studied the three shire horses and a colt munching the buttercup view, and at last in their absorbed slow motion I have clearly established which leg follows which. I had always meant to do that! In my cottage garden a riot of roses catch the first sun while the dew dries on the ripe wild strawberries at their feet. This is the day of relaxation and relief; of being, not doing. At the gallery they are tugging the 188th exhibition into place so my last show must be at an end. Departing tensions have left a residual backache.

Perhaps before memories sweeten with time's passing I should clearly state for the sake of hopeful initiates that gallery-owning is not a charming, sophisticated and elegant way of gaining a living to the sound of trumpets. It involves more capital than you calculated you would ever need to forward the work of artists you admire but who don't necessarily reciprocate your feelings, and persuading some mildly interested visitor to curtail his annual holiday by two weeks or so in order to afford "a dish fit for a king" by a craftsman he had not even heard of one hour ago. Finding out how to do this will absorb the rest of your life!

In 1968 when Oxford Gallery opened the definition and certainly the evaluation of "Craftsmanship" was confused, and anyhow it interested very few people indeed. The long-established rural industries of thatching, boat-building, saddlery and chimney-pot making flourished and needed no special promotion, but the position of the artist-craftsman is another story. In 1902 there had been a totally new element, anti-industrial, almost political, in the migration of a group of journeymen to the Cotswolds from London. They were led by the idealist architect E. R. Ashbee, had founded the Guild of Handcrafts in 1988 under the influence of Ruskin and Morris. Ashbee's concern was as much for quality of life as for design itself, but their apparent "preciousness" embarrassed their country neighbours who gradually built up a picture of a typical artist-craftsman as dressed in shapeless

garments and making brownish objects in drab surroundings. Ernest Gimson, the Barnsleys, Dolmetchs, Bernard Leach and their successors have been the subject of much the same distorted view.

A milestone in design was reached in 1915 when the Design and Industries Association was founded amid the ashes of the Guild of Craftsmen. Led by W. R. Lethaby (ex-principal of the Central School of Art) Cecil Brewer, an architect, John Marshall (of Marshall & Snelgrove) and Ambrose Heal among others, they revived standards of clear and simple design in sound materials. They deplored the pretentious and exotic. Among their successes was a transformation in lettering and printing, and a notable attack on the products of Stoke-on-Trent, who loudly resented the intrusion... Gordon Russell, much admired by the D.I.A., recognised no impediment in working as an independent craftsman and also as a maker of multiples. He was, as many will gratefully remember, the designer of the excellent wartime utility furniture. Thus the Ashbee led tour away from "the satanic mills" came full circle. The old image of craftsmen still persists, however, even among artists. It

has just been alluded to in a Daily News Sheet of this year's International Contemporary Art Fair at Olympia:

"There are two categories of gallery which are edging their way centre-stage: the dealers in craftwork and the livres d'artist. The craft stalls at Olympia can hardly be deemed the cheap option that their name conjures up. With the Lucie Rie bowls at Oxford Gallery going for £1,900 it appears that the collectors can run to more than old tweed jackets and sandals (maybe that's all they could afford to wear after buying one). The irony is of course that the aim of the Arts and Crafts Movement was to produce goods that would be at once useful and beautiful, enhancing everyday life with good design. With the current government-sponsored enthusiasm for design as the salvation for the British economy, the Art School craft departments seem to be resolutely bent on increasing the fine art component at the expense of functionalism...."

To revert to 1968 when Oxford Gallery opened in Oxford's historic High Street; it had been preceded by Muriel Rose in London and then by Primavera in London and Cambridge and Peter Dingley in Stratford on Avon, and there had been a crafts display centre in Hay Hill, London, but generally speaking craftsmanship was still displayed by guilds of craftsmen at annual get-togethers in village halls.

The Crafts Advisory Committee (now the Crafts Council) was not founded by Lord Eccles, with Victor Margrie as its first director, until 1971, but with its coming a little government cash became available which has provided bones of contention ever since!

Nonetheless it is really amazing how much has been achieved for the status of craftsmanship since 1968. As an amusing instance of the attitude to crafts at that time, I had in 1966 been invited to return from India (and a lovely appointment as assistant to a Maharana) to become manager of Bear Lane Gallery, which had made a reputation showing contemporary art in Oxford. I was soon asked by the directors for ideas to fill in a gap in their year's programme, and I suggested an exhibi-



Stoneware Vessel; Hans Coper.



*Ground floor at the Oxford Gallery.*

tion of craftsmanship; this was met by a gasp of horror: "What! – Not casserole!"

I must say that I had some satisfaction in my goodbye exhibition "Oxford Gallery 68–86" in giving it the subtitle "From Casseroles to Cloud Cuckoo Land!" – with a riotous window and birthday cake by Lindy Richardson to celebrate that theme. In 1968 after naming "Oxford Gallery" (the Board of Trade would not let us call it *The Oxford Gallery!*), the first acclaim went to Michael Brawne for his intriguing and adaptable gallery designs, the foundation for so many varied exhibitions which were mounted every five weeks for the next 18 years.

Our concern then was to ensure that an art and craft gallery should be taken as seriously as a fine art gallery, with professional standards of service to our clients and in the design and workmanship which we offered.

It was soon apparent that the public had few guidelines in appreciating craftsmanship and that the craftsmen even undervalued themselves. They, having opted out of the competitive money-orientated business life, rather wanted to remain quietly in their corners of the British Isles making whatever they fancied without having much idea as to how they could afford to do so. The cost of rents, materials and fuel was creeping up and unique work may take unpredict-

able hours and days to complete. Amateur book-keeping did not always reflect the position nor account for the length of time actually expended over and between each job.

I found this close at hand when enquiring into the finances of our own framing workshop. A painstaking estimate by our three framers of the hours taken in making each frame had, in the event, only accounted for one-third of the men's actual worktime, two-thirds having been used in leisurely discussions with clients, in searching for odd short lengths of useful moulding and in uneconomically small and frequent orders to suppliers, also in billing, book-keeping, and often in deliveries as well.

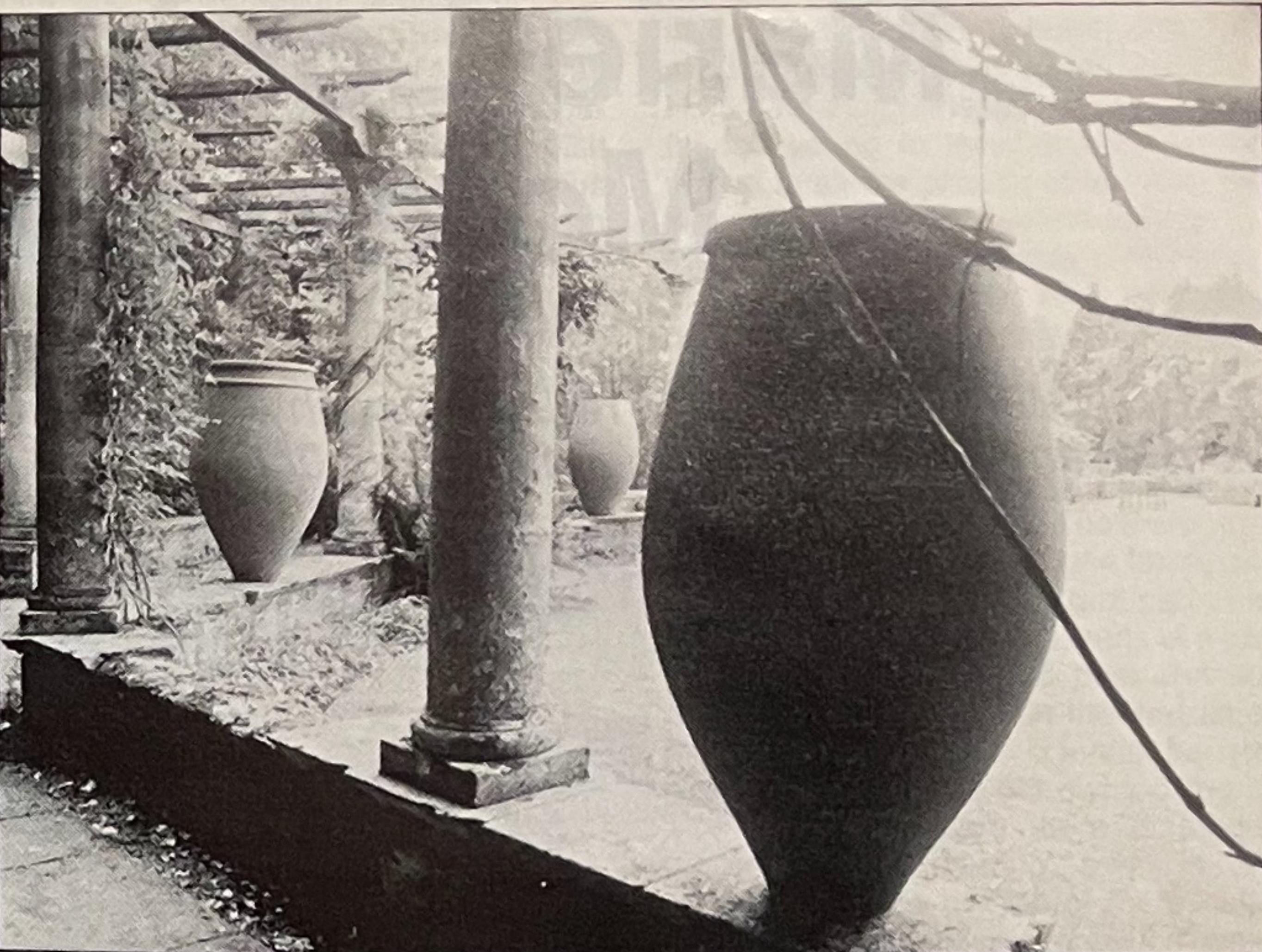
Meanwhile the public, left to itself, continued to assess work for its nostalgic qualities or, in the case of more accessible crafts such as woodwork or embroidery, for its dexterity. In the case of jewellery, the weight and cost of raw materials were often over-riding considerations with the buyer.

There were few knowledgeable collectors and almost no critics willing or equipped to discuss specific categories of craftwork in an historic context, nor as an expression of a wider art movement. The national newspapers were in any case disinclined to send critics out of London and confined their notices to an occasional friendly wave from the Women's Pages. The plethora of gift-shops (lately renamed "Craft Galleries") continued to make a seaside living from pokerwork, postcards and pussycats.

In this atmosphere of incomprehension I was surprised and grateful to the 29 shareholders who allowed themselves to be talked into investing in Oxford Gallery 18 years ago. The gallery has remained triumphantly a totally independent gallery, but the shareholders have never received any interest on their money, only concessionary rates for private purchases. Our chairman, Dr. B. B. Lloyd, formerly vice-president of Magdalen and principal of Oxford Polytechnic, and three of the five original directors, Priscilla Bain, retired headmistress of Tudor Hall, Ethel Fasal who is head of Alpa, her own successful steel and plastics firm, and Valerie Stewart my colleague and company secretary, have remained throughout to tackle each anxious year with me.

Each year as recession deepened a new solution had to be found, and nothing concentrates the mind so efficiently, but adds to one's age so decisively! In early days we devised two outdoor exhibitions of sculpture in partnership with Annely Juda. These were mounted at Blenheim one year and at Woburn Park in the next – rather ludicrously, only their garden centres were proffered in which to show some of England's most distinguished sculptors. We invited authorities such as Pat Gilmour, then keeper of prints at the Tate and now curator of international prints and illustrated books in the Australian National Gallery at Canberra, to select a print exhibition. Likewise Rosemary Simmons, critic, formerly of Curwen Gallery, and also Edward Lucie-Smith, who needs no introduction as poet and critic. He and I selected a ceramics show. Oxford Gallery has exhibited over 2,000 artists and craftsmen since 1968.

About four years ago salaries were voluntarily decreased and lights turned low. We battled over excessive rents and with the City Council over a threat to close the High Street to private cars.



*Colled stoneware pots by Monica Young.*

Meanwhile, slowly, the gallery accumulated about 250 "Friends" who bought more regularly at concessionary rates and did much else to encourage us.

In 1984–1985 I devised our two garden exhibitions for which sculptors and craftsmen in stone and iron, wood and water, clay and cloth made work specifically for each individual site. There was amongst much else a two-ton Pomona in stone from Simon Verity, water sculpture from Bill Pye and a new design in seats from John Makepeace, and also from Jim Partridge. Metal seats and a bridge from Stuart Hill and metal sundials from Peter Parkinson, also umbrellas and flowerpots, baskets from Ireland and decoy ducks by Guy Taplin. The site was a typical romantic 1912 three-acre garden designed by Peto with terraces, summer houses, spinneys and a stream. It belongs to our chairman. The shows were televised by the national Saturday Review and by local midland stations. The Sunday Times carried a half-page review and Country Life published superb sunlit photographs. It attracted many visitors who would never have set foot in a gallery – and they finally brought us through to financial safety, at least for those two years.

On the aesthetic side we were encouraged when in 1984 the Contemporary Art Society decided to return to their earlier policy of buying a proportion of craftsmanship as well as fine art, and they chose some of our finest work to donate to museums – tapestries from Archie Brennan and Roger Oates, ceramics from Alan Caiger-Smith, Sutton Taylor and Elizabeth Raeburn and a silver bowl from John Lloyd.

The Crafts Council invited us to take part in the International Contempor-

ary Art Fair at Olympia in 1985 in iron cold January weather, and in May 1986 in altogether more pleasant circumstances. The participation of five independent galleries was made feasible by the preliminary organisation and partial funding of the Crafts Council. International Fairs of this calibre offer the best opportunity for smaller and specialist English galleries to become known to the growing band of overseas collectors. There are not enough collectors in England itself and yet our potters and jewellers have in my lifetime become world leaders, and artists may well become so in glass and metal.

The auction houses, both Sotheby's and Christies, have been quick to realise this and to instigate sales of growing interest and influence, and the work is often immediately exported. It would be a pity if the pioneering British craft galleries do not equip themselves to garner some of the harvest for which they prepared the ground when no publisher nor critic nor funds were there to support them.

We should of course continue to search for, to encourage and exhibit innovative work, and not rely only on the established and commercially-successful; a sterile and disheartening policy. Now that new opportunities and new markets are becoming available, they must be matched with courage and clear thinking.

Maybe, you who read this should now carry the main thrust while I go back to count the horses, pick the strawberries, arrange the roses and, just possibly, develop at leisure a few new approaches to the promotion of British crafts.

They say spätlese is best!